Alaska Native Subsistence

Cultures and Economy

Presented to

U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

Oversight Hearing on Subsistence Hunting and Fishing

In the State of Alaska

By

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Honorable Senator Inouye and other member of the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. I would like to express my gratitude to the Committee for holding this Oversight Hearing on Subsistence Hunting and Fishing in the State of Alaska. I am honored and humbled that you have been invited me to testify before this Committee. The challenges to subsistence protections and the subsistence lifestyles of Alaska Natives are critical, and my testimony will address the necessity of maintaining the federal protections as they exist under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980.

I am Rosita Worl. I am a member of the Board of Directors of Sealaska Corporation, which was created by Congress in the settlement of our aboriginal land claims. I sit on the Board of Directors of the Alaska Federation of Natives and serve as the Chairperson of its Subsistence Committee. I have a joint appointment as the President of the Sealaska Heritage Institute and a professor of anthropology at the University of Alaska Southeast.

In my testimony, I will be drawing on both my professional training and research and my personal knowledge and experience as a participant in the subsistence culture of the Tlingit. I will apply these perspectives to discuss the significance of

subsistence hunting and fishing in Alaska. I hold a Ph.D. from Harvard University in Anthropology. My subsistence studies began in 1975 when I went to the Arctic to study the political development of the North Slope Inupiat. Since that time I have conducted research throughout the circumpolar Arctic and Alaska. I have served on various scientific committees of the National Science Foundation, the Smithsonian Institution, the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission and the National Scientific Committee for the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Studies. I have written numerous scientific articles on subsistence economies and Alaska Native cultures and have a general understanding of the significance of subsistence.

Today my subsistence studies are sometimes referred to as the early work of subsistence research in Alaska. I believe I was among the first anthropologists to study subsistence as an integrated socioeconomic system and to assess its interrelationship with the cash economy. This was in part due to the development of economic anthropology as a theoretical approach. I have applied both qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches to my study of subsistence.

It has often been said that subsistence cannot be defined, and Alaska Natives generally describe it as a "Way of Life." I beg your indulgence if my testimony

sounds like a lecture, but I hasten to add that in the need for brevity, it may seem as if I am oversimplifying the complexity of the subsistence systems in Alaska. We must have a basic understanding of the dynamic socioeconomic subsistence systems as they exist today. This knowledge is necessary if we are to ensure that the legal regimes of both the federal and state government protect the subsistence lifestyles of Alaska Natives and rural Alaska, and secondly in order to analyze how legislation has the capacity to protect or undermine subsistence activities.

In spite of the overwhelming problems imperiling Alaska Native societies, their cultures remain vibrant. Their languages and cultures have persisted, although changed, despite decades of governmental pressure to assimilate them into the larger society and the extensive forces of sociocultural impacts impinging on their communities. They are among the last societies in North America, who remain largely dependent and culturally attached to a hunting and gathering way of life. The last nomadic hunters in the United States settled in a permanent community in some sixty years ago. Today they continue to practice their ancient ceremonies and to hold the worldview and values of their ancestors. For the United States, they represent a rich cultural resource that is worthy of protection.

Subsistence, as it is practiced by Alaska Natives, contains three basic interrelated components: economic, social and cultural. It operates as a cohesive, adaptive and functioning system.

Cultural

The cultural component includes the values and ideologies that govern and direct subsistence behavior or activities. For example, the value of sharing is key to subsistence and the survival of Native societies. The young are socialized into the value of sharing with kin and community members. Young hunters are taught to share their first take whatever it may be—seal, caribou or fish, and they are rewarded for their behavior. Significant amounts of sharing takes place in ceremonies such as the whaling or seal feast or memorial rituals. Sharing also occurs as part of the value that acknowledges the status of elders. They are given special shares and parts of an animal. This value of sharing with elders functions in many ways like the social security system in which individuals receive retirement benefits. Single women, who act as head of households, also receive special shares.

The cultural component also includes ideologies and beliefs such as the

recognition that wildlife has spirits and that Native people have a kinship or special relationship with them. This relationship obligates Native people to adhere to certain codes of conduct and to treat animals in prescriptive ways to ensure success in future hunts and to assure that animals will return to be harvested. You may have heard Native Peoples say that animals "give" themselves to the hunter. This implies, that it is not skill of the hunter that determines success, but rather it is the animal who decides, based on the proper behavior of the hunter, who will be rewarded in the hunt. These cultural values also serve to protect the animal population base and are the basis of the conservation ethic that has been attributed to traditional Native practices. In some ways these ideologies and the accompanying practices can be compared to the effects of the concept of sustained yield harvests. For example, some groups have taboos on hunting in certain sites which serve to restrict hunting areas and levels.

Social

The social aspect of subsistence refers to the way in which Native people organize themselves to participate in subsistence activities. This socioeconomic organization is based on some form of kinship whether it is along a bilateral kinship system characteristic of the Inupiat and Yup'ik or a clan or some other group

membership such as that adopted by the Siberian Yup'ik of St. Lawrence Island or the Athabascans of Interior Alaska. More often today you will hear references made to the extended family as the hunting unit. It may, however, also include formal partnerships with non-kin. The important dimension here is that the subsistence system operates as a group activity rather than that of a sole hunter pursing game.

These social relationships and participation in subsistence endeavors also function as an educational system or facilitates the training of the young. Not only are the young socialized into the cultural ideologies and cosmologies of their society, they are instructed in the methods of hunting and preserving subsistence foods. They are taught about the environment and wildlife and how to read climatic changes, ice conditions or changing tides.

Economic

The third element of subsistence includes the economic aspect, which consists of the production, distribution and exchange and utilization of natural resources. Production includes the procurement and preservation of subsistence foods. Distribution and exchange refer to the movement of subsistence goods or the

sharing of subsistence foods through the social network. Since land was traditionally owned in common, utilization of land and resources require the sharing of resources. It generally begins with the initial distribution at hunting or fishing sites followed by a secondary distribution through extended kin networks and the ceremonial sharing. Subsistence economies also include the exchange of surplus resources for resources that may not be readily or locally available. Utilization includes the consumption of wildlife and natural resources for food and their use for arts and crafts or other utilitarian objects or equipment such as walrus or bearded seal skins, which are used in the manufacture of boats and other items.

Alaska rural communities are characterized by a dual or mixed economy. In today's subsistence economy, cash is a vital element. It is necessary to purchase rifles, ammo and other tools, supplies, equipment such as snow mobiles. Cash is acquired in multiple ways. The hunter or spouse may be a full or part time wage earner or a family member may earn income through the sale of arts and craft or subsistence service. An elderly member of the social unit may receive a transfer payment and contribute portions of this income to support the subsistence enterprise.

The importance of the subsistence economy in Alaska cannot be overstated. It provides a major portion of the diet in rural Alaska and Native households. The subsistence studies conducted by the State of Alaska attest to this importance. The significance of subsistence can be seen as even more important with the absence or limited wage income opportunities in rural Alaska or its seasonal nature. The limitations on wage income opportunities in rural Alaska are further exacerbated by the highest cost of living within the United States. Without a subsistence economy, hunger would be the norm in Alaska Native and rural communities. These assertions are all verifiable by hard statistical data.

Policy makers and social scientists once simply assumed that subsistence hunters and gathers would move in a unilateral direction from subsistence hunting and fishing to a cash economy. The history and case study of Alaska Natives refute this assumption. However, the persistence of the subsistence lifestyles of Alaska Natives cannot be attributed to the absence or constraints of wage opportunities in their communities. Alaska Natives have opposed legislative measures that cast subsistence as welfare or portrays it as a form of underemployment. This perspective ignores the social, cultural and ideological importance of subsistence and the attachment that Natives have to their way of life.

Despite the changes within Native communities, Alaska Natives remain culturally distinct from the larger American culture and society. Their worldview differs in that they recognize and maintain a special or a spiritual relationship to wildlife. I wear the Eagle on my clothing and the Sun and Shark on my jewelry, not for decorative or aesthetic reasons, but because of the relationship I have with their spirits and with my ancestors who acquired these rights and relationships for me and other members of my clan. Another major cultural difference between Natives and non-Natives, that is particularly relevant to the subsistence issue, is that Native societies maintain a group orientation rather than the individualistic nature of the American society and American values.

Native cultural and religious ideologies can sometimes be protected under the freedom of religion policies and laws. For example, in the Carlos Frank case, the Athabascans won a lawsuit against the State of Alaska in which they had been charged for hunting a moose out of season. In this case, the moose was required for a traditional ceremony. Alaska Natives are required to feed the spirits of their ancestors.

Laws embody the values of their society, and American law generally reflects the

individualistic nature of this society rather than the group orientation of Native societies. American values, however, recognize the importance of cultural diversity. Our laws and policies theoretical embrace the philosophical construct of cultural diversity, but this does not necessarily mean they will reflect the group orientation value held by Alaska Natives and American Indians[1]. However, the federal government does accord Alaska Natives and American Indians a special political status. This unique political status, which differs from that of all other Americans, implicitly offers the opportunity to acknowledge and protect the different cultural values that characterize American Indian and Alaska Native societies. In the case of Alaska Natives, their cultural values and subsistence protections were possible, in part, through the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980.

ANILCA is imperfect in fully protecting the cultures of Alaska Natives, but fortunately, as it has been interpreted and implemented, ANILCA has offered the only measure of protection for subsistence against the State of Alaska, which has refused to recognize a rural subsistence hunting and fishing priority. Title VIII of

[1]The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act recognizes the significance of a group orientation with the designation that items of cultural patrimony should be subject to repatriation claims.

ANILCA requires that “subsistence uses” be given priority over the taking of fish and wildlife for other purposes. It defines “subsistence uses” as the “customary and traditional uses by rural Alaska residents...” ANILCA provides a priority for rural residents of communities that have a customary and traditional uses of a particular resource. I am not a lawyer, but as an anthropologist, I note the significance of ANILCA is that it provides protection for “communities” or for groups rather than individual-based uses and protection based on customary and traditional uses.

The State of Alaska has not yet adopted an amendment to its constitution to give a subsistence priority to rural Alaska. The prevalent argument advanced by a small, but vocal minority of Alaskans is to oppose a constitutional amendment because it violates “equal” access to fish and wildlife. This argument is used to support amendments to ANILCA rather than to bring the State into compliance with federal law. My purpose is not to discuss the contradictions and fallacy of the equality argument as it is used in the subsistence debate. All laws make distinctions among classes of people and citizens, and in Alaska, its citizens were willing to amend the State Constitution to give a small number of individuals the right of access to most all of Alaska’s fisheries through the Limited Entry Permit System (less than 14,000

permit holders take 97 percent of the fishery resources in Alaska). Additionally, Alaska extends to only a 1,000 or more individuals the right to hold guiding permits to large tracts of land.

It is important to assess the underlying meaning of the equal access argument as advanced by the subsistence opponents to understand the potential ramifications should they be successful in amending ANILCA to embrace their ideology. I would suggest that they seek to advance an "individualistic" subsistence priority rather than that embodied in ANILCA that recognizes a rural, community-based traditional and customary subsistence use. This "equality" argument as it is used in the subsistence debate is ludicrous given the earlier constitutional amendment that provided for an inequitable allocation of natural resources and in view of the scope of political and fiscal inequity endured by Alaska Natives.

I have attempted to describe the dynamics and significance of Alaska Native subsistence economies and culture. I suggest that ANILCA, as it is written, protects the group realities and nature of Alaska Native subsistence activities. The Native community and AFN have resisted both legal and political attempts that would alter these protections. I would pray that Congress will not condone the

further erosion of subsistence and cultural protection for its indigenous populations. I would hope that Congress will see that ANILCA is a means to ensure the cultural survival of Alaska Natives and to maintain the rich cultural diversity of this country. I would hope that Congress will continue to support and urge the State of Alaska to advance a constitutional amendment that brings it into compliance with ANILCA. It would be my hope that Congress will continue to support ANILCA as it is written, unless in its wisdom, it should choose to adopt a Native subsistence priority.